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Going to the Great White North **Lorraine Mallinder**

Hurling has been undergoing a revival in Canada of late. This year, for the first time in two decades, there were enough players in Toronto for two full teams. "All the fellows came out of the woodwork with their helmets. It was big news in the park," says Mark O'Brien, president of the city's Gaelic Athletic Association.

The upsurge in interest is thanks to a new wave of Irish immigrants to Canada. Young, educated and ambitious, they come in search of career opportunities that can no longer be found back home. "I'm meeting people with fairly deep credentials, who have toiled in Ireland to find a job and given up. They say they are lucky to get their work permit. They all seem to know ten other people waiting in the wings to get one," says O'Brien.

With many new arrivals signing up for hurling or Gaelic football teams, sporting activity tends to be a good barometer of immigration trends. O'Brien's testimony is borne out by official statistics. According to Canada's immigration department, numbers of temporary Irish immigrants have shot up over the past decade, from 1,118 a year in 2000 to 2,959 in 2009. The numbers of registered permanent immigrants went from 180 to 503 over the same period.

Many arrive through the USIT system of one-year working holiday visas for people under 35. In the first nine months of 2010, 2500 participants arrived from Ireland, according to Laurinda Tracey, national inbound officer for SWAP, which partners with USIT in Canada. Many would have been students, but increasing numbers are professionals hunting for jobs in sectors like architecture and engineering, who will subsequently extend their stay with temporary or permanent residence visas.

Often, these professionals find themselves left in the lurch, says Sean Twomey, secretary of the Irish Sporting and Social Club in Vancouver, which has experienced a 40% hike in membership since last year. Having discovered that their USIT permit is not eligible for extension - a fact overlooked by many - they then have to persuade their employers to sponsor them, an expensive and sometimes lengthy process which requires proof that the position could not be filled by anyone else.

"Right now, the main topic of conversation among Irish immigrants seems to be: 'what stage is your visa application at?'" says Twomey. "If you're a professional, unless you have a lot of experience, you will find it difficult. The thing is, your company has to need you to stay. You have to be valuable. It's definitely stressful for a lot of people."

A chemical engineer, he arrived "before the rush" in 2008, finding work with a waste water plant. He advises would-be immigrants to research their move carefully and to come with enough money to see them through the initial months while they hold out for a job in their sector. It's worthwhile looking beyond the glamorous cities hugging the US border and heading north. The Gaelic football club in Edmonton, Alberta, has recently doubled in size with the recent influx of immigrants, he says.

O'Brien notes that this wave of Irish immigrants, the "Celtic Tiger children", is very different to the previous generation who fled recession in the eighties. "People who emigrated 20 to 25 years ago were looking for any kind of work. The newcomers tend to be very picky, turning their noses up at jobs they think are below them" he says. "They grew up with a silver spoon in their mouths. They thought they were wealthy. Now they find they're not and have to fend for themselves, but they're not prepared for it."

Canadian immigration minister Jason Kenney announced this month that Canada will maintain high levels of immigration in 2011 to sustain its economic recovery. For this vast country with a relatively small population (34 million), it's a matter of survival. The combination of an ageing population and low birth rates presages a workforce crisis in the not-too-distant future. According to government estimates, within the next five years, all of the country's labour force growth will come from immigration.

Vanessa Conneely, 31, from Moycullen, Galway

Peter Ustinov described it as New York run by the Swiss. Squeaky clean Toronto might not be the most exciting place on the planet but it is a great place to advance your career, says journalist Vanessa Conneely. “It grows on you,” says Conneely, who arrived last year on a one-year permit with her partner, quickly landing on her feet at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. “Life is easy here. You can eat out so cheaply, it’s healthy, clean and safe. And, the people are friendly.”

But, she warns, orient yourself before coming over: “Hit the ground running with a professional CV and a services CV for a quick job.” With some companies conducting three interviews before they recruit, it is worth considering casual work to keep afloat during your job search.

With their permits now reaching term, Conneely’s partner, who works as a security manager for a major entertainment venue, is now applying for a skilled worker visa. If successful, she would also qualify for a permit as his spouse.

The waiting game brings a new set of challenges. “It’s hard to live in limbo,” says Conneely. “It’s completely out of our control. We can’t even buy a saucepan without wondering whether we can bring it home.”

Evan Blake, 35, from Kilmihil, County Clare

French-speaking Quebec may appeal to immigrants seeking North American standards of living with a touch of ooh-la-la. But, Evan Blake has a cautionary tale for anyone thinking of making the move there. A qualified fitness consultant, Blake arrived in Quebec City in 2008 on a three-year work permit, which he had obtained through his partner’s application for a student visa. Fluent in French, he planned to work as a waiter while applying for jobs. But, as a non-native speaker, he found it impossible to get his foot in the door and ended up teaching English instead.

In Montreal, potential employers were unwilling to consider his academic credentials, so he applied for an official translation of his qualifications, only to find the French document headlined with the off-putting caveat that the version “wasn’t accurate, but estimated”. After nine months of waiting, this came as a blow. Blake believes the province has protectionist tendencies. “They fear outsiders. They fear their language and culture will be lost,” he says. “It’s hard to get work that will pay the bills and give you valuable experience on your resume.” He advises potential immigrants to go only if they have a job already lined up.

Now working in a yoga studio as a part-time receptionist, Blake also does stints at a “dreaded call centre”. He is currently applying for work in Alberta.

Paul Gleeson, 34, from Limerick

Surrounded by water and a breathtaking mountain range, Vancouver is renowned for its freewheeling west-coast vibe. But, as Paul Gleeson discovered, it also has a highly sophisticated financial services sector, “light years” ahead of what he knew back home.

The financial advisor moved in 2008 on a one-year work permit to join his Canadian girlfriend. Before his time was up, he hired an immigration lawyer to secure him a permanent residence visa. “There wasn’t much change left over from six grand,” he says wryly. But, it was worth it.

Gleeson found work with a wealth management company four months after arriving. He had to take his exams again and learn how things were done in Canada. “From an intellectual perspective, I know way more now, though I’m not yet making more money,” he says.

He enjoys the “outdoorsy” lifestyle, but is not yet sure if he will stay forever. Canadians are an unfailingly polite and friendly lot, he says, though he has also noticed that it takes longer to “scratch beneath the surface” and get to know people properly.

Ends

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Factfile - how to emigrate to Canada

- ≡ USIT's under 35 programme allows participants to spend up to a year living and working in Canada. Permits cannot be extended. Participants wishing to stay longer have to apply directly to the Canadian immigration authorities. Visit: <http://www.workincanada.ie/>
- ≡ Apply for permanent residence through the federal skilled worker programme. Applications sent from Ireland are funnelled through the Canadian High Commission in London. According to official statistics, applications received between November 2008 and June 2010 took 13 months to process. Visit: <http://www.cic.gc.ca>. NB: Would-be immigrants to Quebec must first apply for clearance through the provincial government. Visit: <http://www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca>
- ≡ You can also apply for permanent residence through a system of provincial and territorial nominations. Applicants able to fill skills gaps obtain a provincial nomination certificate, which is then attached to their federal application (see above). Provincial contacts at : <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/applications/guides/EP72.asp>
- ≡ Should you manage to find a job before leaving Ireland, you can apply for a temporary work permit. However, your employer will need to prove that they had no choice but to hire a foreign national for the job. Visit: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/work/index.asp>
- ≡ Immigrants who have already arrived in Canada through the USIT programme can apply to the skilled worker or provincial nominee programmes. In both cases, their employers will have to prove that they were unable to contract a Canadian national to do the job, a process which is becoming increasingly difficult.
- ≡ Occupations in demand include: restaurant and food service managers, biologists, architects, general practitioners, dentists, pharmacists, nurses, psychologists, social workers, chefs, cooks, electricians, plumbers, welders and crane operators.